



An analysis of how government support, entrepreneurship, service innovation, and e-readiness affect a Thai SME hotel's competitive advantage

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Abstract

Essential elements of economic development are small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which are considered the primary mechanism for enhancing income and employment of countries around the world. In Thailand, most hotels function within the spectrum as SMEs, which therefore are a crucial element in providing a memorable experience to Thailand's 40 million foreign visitors and domestic Thai tourists. Therefore, the authors undertook a study of the opinions of 280 SME hotel owners, managers, and advisors to investigate their opinions concerning their hotel's competitive advantage (CA). LISREL 9.1 was used to analyse the owners and managers opinions on how a Thai SME hotel's CA was affected by government support (GS), entrepreneurship (EN), service innovation (SI), and electronic e-readiness (e-RE). Results from the five-province sample revealed that all the causal variables positively influenced CA, as the combined variance of influence was 77% (R^2). Also, from the study's eight SEM hypotheses results, the factors most relevant to a Thai hotel entrepreneur's CA when ranked in importance were SI, e-RE, EN, and GS. Finally, SI was determined to be most essential to a hotel entrepreneur's CA, which included the manifest variables product innovation, process innovation, and marketing innovation.

Keywords: Hotel SMEs, ICT, Southeast Asia, Thailand, tourism.

Introduction

SMEs are an integral part of economic development and are considered as the primary mechanism for enhancing income and employment of countries around the world (Amaradiwakara, 2017). SMEs are also the backbone of national economic growth, with micro-SMEs now responsible for 43% of Thailand's gross domestic product (GDP) (NNT, 2019). Additionally, Thai SMEs are reported to employ approximately 14 million workers who represent nearly 85% of the total labour force (Figure 1).

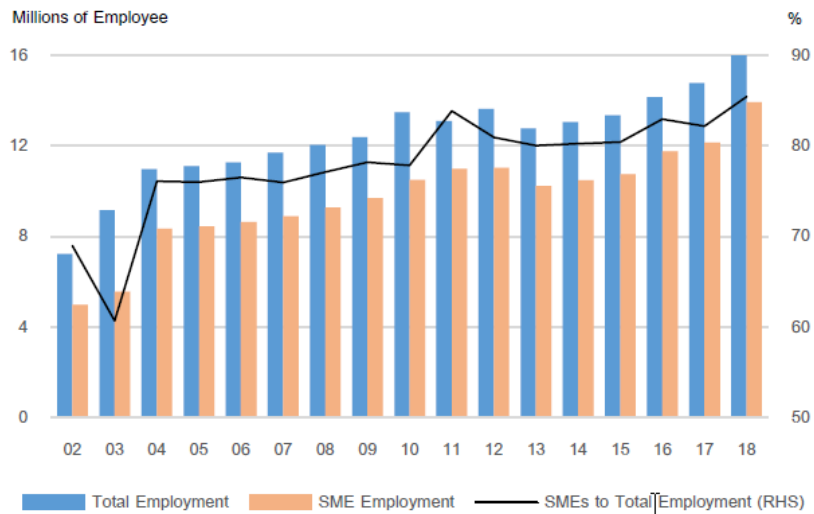


Figure 1. Thailand's SME employment 2002-2018.
 Source: The Office of SMRs Promotion (2019).

Furthermore, a significant component of the SEM sector is the tourism and hospitality industry. Numerous recent studies have discussed Thailand's hyper-growth in this segment, which today is projecting 40 million foreign tourists in 2019, keeping Thailand in the top ten of world destinations (Wongkhajornpaibul & Sornsarut, 2019). However, accommodations are an essential aspect in the travel enjoyment for both Thai domestic tourists and foreign travellers, with officials from the Thai Hotels Association (THA) calling for SME hotel entrepreneurs to improve their products and services to enhance their competitiveness (Sritama, 2018), especially against rising tourism markets such as Vietnam and Cambodia.

It has also been suggested that SME hotel owners should develop their brands and obtain trusted national or international standards, as a hotel's brand will be a defining part of the hotel's profitability, value, and image, which is probably the most crucial decision affecting the property's future value (Braun, 2013). Brands establish standards, and in Thailand, standard certifications come from the Thailand Tourism Award, the Green Leaf Award, or the Kinnari Award (Tourism Authority of Thailand -TAT). Adding value to tourism products and services is also a key element in the ASEAN Tourism Strategy Plan 2016 - 2025 (ASEAN, 2015).

One way to add value by an SME hotel entrepreneur is to add uniqueness to the stay. This can include custom-made tour packages that offer guests immersive travel experiences such as tours to temples, visits to the local community, cultural and historic site tours, and Thai cooking classes.

Furthermore, government support (GS) is a critical aspect of a Thai SME hotel's competitive advantage. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it was determined that hotel entrepreneurs stated the need for government leaders to play a more proactive role in tourism promotion (Ahmad, 2015). Nicolaidis (2016) also articulates the notion that it is critical for businesses in a free market economy to be involved in promoting industries like tourism and hospitality.

Fortunately, Thailand has several financial assistance programs for hotel entrepreneurs to participate in, including the Pracha Rat (People's State) programme fund. This is a joint program with the Industry Ministry's Department of Tourism and the SME Development Bank of Thailand (Sritama, 2018). Further government support comes from the 1% low-interest loans from the

'Thao Kae 4.0 Loan Program' with a three-year grace period. There is also the 3% 'Sin Chuea Setthakit Tid Dao,' with the Thai Credit Guarantee Corporation acting as guarantor during the initial four year loan period. All have been stated to useful and accessible to SME hotel operators.

Thai government support has, therefore, been identified as crucial both within the SME sector and specifically to an SME hotel's sustainability in a highly competitive, international industry. Figure 2 shows both large enterprise and SME loan credits from 2006 through 2019 as well.

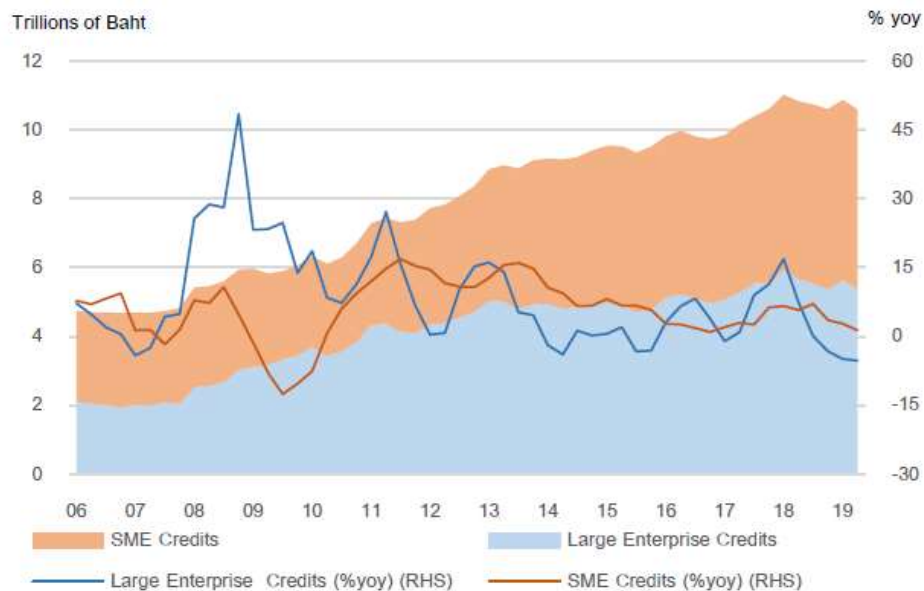


Figure 2. Thailand's government support credits 2006-2019.
 Source: The Office of SMRs Promotion (2019).

Another critical aspect in an SME hotel sustaining a competitive advantage is their level of entrepreneurship (EN), as research has suggested that managerial competencies and personality impacts a hotel's performance significantly. In Malaysia, Salleh and Yacob (1996) have stated that a persistent problem is lack of leadership in programmed delivery, inadequate plan development, and weak coordination of policy amongst various government agencies. Some might say, "Entrepreneurs hate paperwork!"

In Thailand, research on hotel entrepreneurs in Northeast Thailand determined that there were a multiplicity of skills required to be effective, some of these included empowering staff, open-mindedness, effective communication skills, and understanding guest needs (Jankanakittikul et al., 2018). In the UAE, entrepreneurship characteristics included being male who was self-confident. They were also persistent and independent and were motivated by wanting to be independent financially, being one's boss, and being involved in an enterprise owned by their family (Ahmad, 2015).

Another aspect key to a SME hotel's competitive advantage is service innovation (SI), as a hotel's SI is the consistent, coherent, and comprehensive presence of values and norms that promote vision, fresh thinking, and swift execution (Chen, 2011). Khuong and Giang (2014) in Vietnam also felt that SI was involved with marketing, processes, price, customized services, and information technologies, and by the use of these factors, hotel entrepreneurs can assure their guest's return intention. Another critical aspect of SI is the essential role it plays in a hotel's



management as it allows for service differentiation and creates profits.

In Malaysia, hotel SI was determined as the introduction or modification of services (Veerakumaran, 2009). Baradarani and Kilic (2018), on the other hand, felt that hotel management needed to create a trusting and secure environment for work, so staff could participate eagerly in SI activities.

Finally, the authors also identified a hotel entrepreneur's competitive advantage is also dependent on their electronic 'e-readiness' (e-RE). E-readiness has been stated as a measurement of the preparedness and willingness of an organization's use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Piman & Poldee, 2016). According to Lui and Picolli (2010), technologies which can be used by guests unaided by staff are changing the hotel industry's ways and means of doing business. Additionally, Lai (2007) researched a hotel's ICT readiness and reported that higher IT-based services lead directly to the perception of higher service quality and hotel guest loyalty.

Therefore, the study aims to investigate the interrelationship importance of government support (GS), entrepreneurship (EN), service innovation (SI), and electronic e-readiness (e-RE) on a Thai SME hotel's competitive advantage (CA).

Objectives of the Research

1. The researchers wished to undertake the development of a structural equation model [SEM] of factors concerning a Thai SME hotel's competitive advantage (CA). 2. From the SEM's analysis, compare the factor's interrelationships and determine their importance to hotel entrepreneurs and managers.

Research Hypothesis

From the examination of the literature and related theory, the authors determined that the hotel's competitive advantage (CA) was affected by government support (SU), entrepreneurship (EN), innovation (IN), and readiness (RE). From this, eight hypotheses and a conceptualized framework were developed (Figure 3):

- H1: GS influences EN directly.*
- H2: GS influences e-RE directly.*
- H3: GS influences SI directly.*
- H4: EN influences e-RE directly.*
- H5: EN influences SI directly.*
- H6: SI influences e-RE directly.*
- H7: SI influences CA directly.*
- H8: e-RE influences CA directly.*

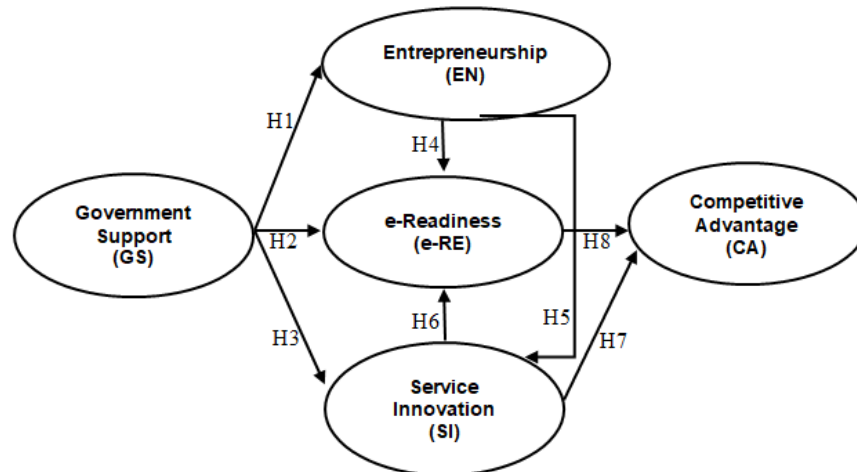


Figure 3. Conceptual Model.

Source: Authors' conceptual model developed from theory and literature.

Methods and Materials

The population for the study was tourism industry SME entrepreneurs involved with Thai government registered hotels, camps, and temporary accommodations. Starting in January 2016 through June 2016, 350 individuals were selected by systematic random sampling across five central regions and metro areas. The sample size was determined from theory in which multiple scholars have suggested some ratio of surveys to manifest variables is a proper technique. Commonly quoted scholars include Schumacker and Lomax (2010) who suggest a multiple of 10 to 20. From this determination, the authors have identified 14 manifest variables for the study used a multiple of 20 to determine the need for 280 complete questionnaires. Therefore, from the identified 12,654 enterprises, the authors set an initial target of 350 (Table 1), which allowed for non-response errors.

Table 1. Target sample sizes by region.

Region	Population	Sample
Bangkok	728	20
Central	3,273	91
Northern	2,321	64
North East (Isan)	2,204	61
Southern	4,128	114
Total	12,654	350

Source: Thailand National Statistical Office

Questionnaire Development

From the focus group session, five academic, hotel, and tourism industry experts also shared their views on what aspects are essential elements in a Thai SME hotel's competitive advantage (CA). After which, questionnaire validity was verified by use of the index of item-objective congruence (IOC) (Turner & Carson, 2003), with IOC scores ≥ 0.50 considered acceptable. From this phase, IOC ranged from .80 – 1.00. After that, a 30 individual pilot-test was conducted on hotel owners who did not participate in the subsequent sample and study. Cronbach's alpha was then used to assess the pilot-test reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011), which was assessed at an average $\alpha = 0.78$, so the questionnaire was deemed to be acceptable.



Tools used in the Research's Development

The tools used to collect data in this research consisted of a structured interview as well as the analysis and synthesis of research from the theoretical and conceptual framework. From the structured expert interview, five main areas were identified. These include information about the hotel owner/manager's gender, age, education, and work experience. Part 2, through part 5 used a 5-level opinion agreement scale to access the respondent's opinion.

Data Analysis

Preliminary item reliability testing was obtained by using Cronbach's α . The scores from the 5-expert focus group were calculated from 0.71 – 0.87, which was ranked as 'acceptable'.

Results

The study's results are as follows:

Thai SME Hotel Owner/Manager Characteristics

Table 2 details the hotel owner's questionnaire. Results showed that 63.21% were men, with nearly 50% being over the age of 50. This included 22.14% being 61 or over, 19.64% from 56-60, and 17.14% from 51-55. Also, 99.29% had an undergraduate degree or higher. Most were the owner (46.43%), with 42.50% having 15 or more years' experience in their job.

Table 2. Hotel SME owner/manager characteristics ($n=280$)

Item	Frequencies	%
Gender		
Male	177	63.21
Female	103	36.79
Total	280	100
Age		
35 or under.	24	8.57
36-40	26	9.29
41-45	34	12.14
46-50	31	11.07
51-55	48	17.14
56-60	55	19.64
61 or over.	62	22.14
Total	280	100
Education		
No college education	2	.71
BA/BS Degree	171	61.07
Postgraduate	107	38.21
Total	280	100
Position		
Owner	130	46.43
Hotel manager	37	13.21
Hotel Assistant Manager	18	6.43
Executive Director	51	18.21
Hotel Advisor	44	15.71
Total	280	100
Work Experience		



Less than three years.	5	1.79
3 -5	10	3.57
6-8	15	5.36
9-11	58	20.71
12-14	73	26.07
15 or more years.	119	42.50
Total	280	100

Source: The study's questionnaire.

Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) Analysis

A GoF assessment was made for the model's fit during the CFA. From that, all indices were either validated or found to be acceptable (Table 3).

Table 3. GoF criteria and results.

Indices	Criteria	Values	Results	Supporting theory
Chi-square: χ^2	$p \geq 0.05$	0.53	passed	Voerman (2003)
Relative Chi-square: χ^2/df	≤ 2.00	0.96	passed	Byrne et al. (1989)
RMSEA - root mean square error of approximation	≤ 0.05	0.00	passed	Hu and Bentler (1999)
GFI - goodness of fit index	≥ 0.90	0.98	passed	Jöreskog et al. (2016)
AGFI - adjusted goodness of fit index	≥ 0.90	0.95	passed	Hooper et al. (2008)
RMR - root mean square residual	≤ 0.05	0.03	passed	Hu and Bentler (1999)
SRMR - standardized root mean square residual	≤ 0.05	0.03	passed	Hu and Bentler (1999)
NFI - normed fit index	≥ 0.90	0.98	passed	Schumacker and Lomax (2010)
CFI - confirmatory fit index	≥ 0.90	1.00	passed	Schumacker and Lomax (2010)
Cronbach's α	≥ 0.70	0.71-0.87	acceptable	Tavakol and Dennick (2011)

Source: GoF Testing results by the authors.

CFA and Cronbach α Results

Table 4 shows the outcome of the two-step analysis of the internal and external variables suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1998).

Table 4. CFA results.

External Latent variable	α	AVE	CR	Manifest variables	loading	R ²
Government support (GS)	0.77	0.40	0.67	Structural development (x1)	0.63	.40
				Funding support (x2)	0.65	.42
				Business networking (x3)	0.63	.40
Internal Latent variables	α	AVE	CR	Manifest variables	loading	R ²
Entrepreneurship (EN)	0.73	0.45	0.70	Innovation (y6)	0.78	.60
				Entrepreneur/managers enthusiasm (y7)	0.74	.54
				Courage to risk (y8)	0.43	.18
Service innovation (SI)	0.83	0.60	0.81	Product innovation (y9)	0.67	.45
				Process innovation (y10)	0.62	.38
				Marketing innovation (y11)	0.98	.97



Competitive advantage (CA)	0.71	0.10	0.21	Cost (y1)	0.38	.14
				Quality (y2)	0.24	.05
				Business differentiation (y3)	0.23	.05
e-Readiness (e-RE)	0.87	0.66	0.79	Technology (y4)	0.75	.55
				Personnel (y5)	0.87	.76

Source: CFA results by the authors.

Effect Decomposition

The values from the total effect (TE) decomposition are detailed in Table 5 (Bollen, 1987), which also confirms that all the SEM's causal variables had a positive effect on a Thai SME hotel's CA, which can be combined to explain the variance of the factors affecting CA (R²) by 89%. Ranked in importance, factors influencing CA were SI, e-RE, EN, and GS, as the TE values were 0.75, 0.60, 0.55, and 0.36, respectively.

Table 5. Standard coefficient of influence in the SEM of variables that influence competitive advantage (CA).

Dependent variables	R ²	Effect	Independent variables			
			GS	EN	SI	e-RE
EN	.14	DE	0.38**			
		IE	-			
		TE	0.38**			
SI	.32	DE	0.18*	0.47**		
		IE	0.18*	-		
		TE	0.36**	0.47**		
e-RE	.64	DE	0.02	0.32**	0.58**	
		IE	0.33**	0.27**	-	
		TE	0.35**	0.59**	0.58**	
CA	.89	DE			0.40	0.60**
		IE	0.36**	0.55**	0.35	-
		TE	0.36**	0.55**	0.75**	0.60**

*Sig. ≤ .05, **Sig. ≤ .01, direct effect (DE), indirect effect (IE), and the total effect (TE)

Source: Authors' SEM results

SEM Results

Table 6 shows the internal consistency of the model. Table 7 and Figure 2 show the results of hypotheses testing. Table 7 and Figure 4 detail the hypotheses testing results.

Table 6. Standard coefficients for the variables that affect CA.

Latent variables	GS	EN	SI	RE	CA
Government support (GS)	1.00				
Entrepreneurship (EN)	.25**	1.00			
Service innovation (SI)	.21**	.44**	1.00		
e-Readiness (e-RE)	.04	.20**	.42**	1.00	
Competitive advantage (CA)	.23**	.37**	.55**	.45**	1.00
ρ_V (AVE)	0.38	0.46	0.48	0.10	0.66
ρ_C (Construct Reliability)	0.65	0.70	0.71	.24	0.79
\sqrt{AVE}	0.62	0.68	0.69	0.32	0.81

**Sig. ≤ .01. Source: Results are from LISREL 9.1 analysis by the authors.

Table 7. The SEM's hypotheses testing results.

Hypotheses	Correlation Coefficient	t-test values	Results
H1: GS influences EN directly	0.38	4.41**	Conforms
H2: GS influences e-RE directly	0.02	0.18	Does not conform
H3: GS influences SI directly	0.18	2.08*	Conforms
H4: EN influences e-RE directly	0.32	3.36**	Conforms
H5: EN influences SI directly	0.47	3.85**	Conforms
H6: SI influences RE directly	0.58	3.66**	Conforms
H7: SI influences CA directly	0.40	1.63	Does not conform
H8: e-RE influences CA directly	0.60	2.56*	Conforms

Sig. < .05, **Sig. < .01, Source: Authors' analysis.

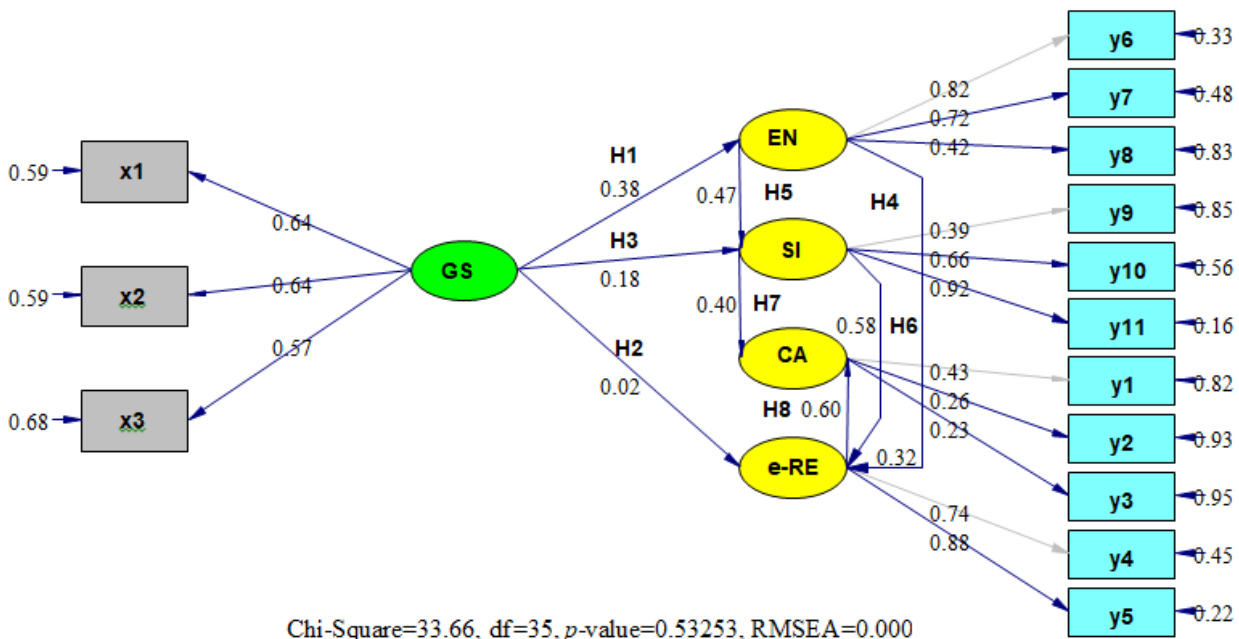


Figure 4. Final Results of the Eight Hypotheses SEM for a Thai SEM Hotel's CA.
 Source: The authors' LISREL 9.1 analysis.

Discussion

Due to the combined variance of influence of 77% (R^2), all the model's causal variables had a positive influence on a Thai SME hotel CA. Also, from the study's eight hypotheses, the factors most relevant to a Thai hotel entrepreneur's CA were SI, e-RE, EN, and GS, with TE)values of 0.75, 0.60, 0.55, and 0.36, respectively.

Government Support (GS)

From H1's testing, results showed that there was a weak and positive interrelationship between GS and EN, as $r = 0.38$, t -value = 4.41, and $p \leq 0.01$ (Table 8). However, H2's interrelationship between GS and e-RE was not supported as $r = 0.02$, t -value = 0.18. Moreover, H3's interrelationship between GS and SI was also weak but positive as $r = 0.18$, t -value = 2.08, and $p \leq 0.05$.



The study concluded that government support is essential for a Thai hotel SME's CA. As such, one of Thailand's focuses being the ease of borrowing money and obtaining the proper licensing to build facilities and do business (Sritama, 2018). Another is certification, training, and raising a hotel to an international standard. However, this is not easy as the demand exceeds 200,000 Thai hospitality graduates annually, with only 20,000 available after graduating with a tourism related degree (McCafferty, 2018). Furthermore, according to the OECD (2019), SMEs have more significant challenges in identifying, attracting, and developing skills than larger firms.

Another factor in Thailand has been the change in the laws and regulations concerning the requirements for SME hotels. Fortunately, on 12 June 2019, there was a suspension to 18 August 2021 by the Thai government which effectively granted Thai hotel owners a 'grace period' in which to comply with the new regulations (Barnett, 2019). This is consistent with the OECD (2019), in which it was stated that regulatory procedure complexity is still a significant obstacle for entrepreneurs and SMEs.

Entrepreneurship (EN)

Hypotheses testing for EN entailed the interrelationship between EN and e-RE which was shown to be weak but positive as $r = 0.32$, the t-test value = 3.36, and $p \leq 0.01$. Additionally, H5's interrelationship between EN and SI moderate and positive as $r = 0.47$, the t-test value = 3.85, and $p \leq 0.01$.

These findings are consistent from research on Austrian hotels in which it was reported that guests perceive entrepreneurially managed hotels as a unique brand, mostly due to the personal relationship between the hotel's owners, family, and staff on one side, and the hotel guest on the other side (Peters & Frehse, 2011).

Service Innovation (ST)

Furthermore, H6 also was established to have an interrelationship that was moderate and positive between SI and RE as $r = 0.58$, the t-test value = 3.66, and $p \leq 0.01$. However, H7's interrelationship between SI and CA was unsupported.

Drucker (1994) stated that innovation is an entrepreneurial tool which creates competitive potential and wealth. This is consistent with Karunaratne and Jayawardena (2011) which stated that customer satisfaction is an essential aspect for a hotel's sustainable CA, which requires hotels to deliver high-quality services (Angelova & Zekiri, 2011). Additionally, Untari and Satria (2019) also stated the importance of hotel managers understand the importance of their guest's specific interests when they are booking their accommodations. In Thailand, Mingkhwansakul and Rungsawanpho (2018) have written that hotel entrepreneurs should also use staff development programs and modern technologies to enhance SI. This is consistent from the Italian hotel industry in which innovation, technology implementation, and supplementary services were stated as drivers of value creation and international competitiveness (Capocchi, 2014).

e-Readiness (e-RE)

Also, the interrelationship between e-RE and CA was considered as strong and positive in H8 as $r = 0.60$, t-value = 2.56, and $p \leq 0.01$. This is consistent with a hotel study in Vietnam in which Bui et al. (2006) suggested that e-commerce can be a seamless enabler in a highly competitive economy, which in turn is a key for a CA who uses it effectively. This is consistent with Rondeau (2016) who stated that hotels which wanted to sustain a CA needed to find solutions to



accommodate their hotel's booking to decrease a guest's use of expensive commission OTA (online travel agency) sites.

Competitive Advantage (CA)

Finally, CA, in the study, contained two manifest variables, including technology (y4) and personnel (y5). Both items were reported to be of great importance to the hotel owners and managers as technology had a mean score of 4.00 and an S.D. score of .57. Personnel was ranked slightly higher as the mean = 4.01 and the S.D. = .71.

This is consistent with Bilgihan et al. (2011) in which it was determined that hotel ICT investments could lead to customer response agility, lower cost, innovation, guest added value, and better customer service. Additionally, hotel competitiveness requires local Thai hotels to seek standards and tools to help them with their guest satisfaction (Narangajavana and Hu, 2008). To be competitive and achieve a sustainable CA, hotels need to embrace Porter's (1985) 'generic strategies,' which include maintaining cost leadership, providing products and unique services, and maintaining a direction and focus. One way to reduce cost is to develop an effective method for resource management, which is an inexpensive and effective method to accomplish this (Atkin et al., 2012). Delivering excellent value is also essential to CA, which entails creating a culture which is innovative (Agus & Hassan, 2011). Moreover, there is flexibility which is the ability to respond quickly in the shortest possible time.

Conclusion

The study set forth to investigate the aspects which affect a Thai SME hotel's competitive advantage. From the eight hypotheses, six were supported, and two were rejected with service innovation determined as foremost in importance to a Thai SME hotel entrepreneur's competitive advantage.

Unfortunately, Thai hotels today are also faced with many external challenges, such as foreign competition from local neighbours, global trade wars, oil price shocks, and the Thai baht's currency strength. Therefore, entrepreneurs need to quickly adjust service and pricing to maintain a competitive edge and for their very survival.

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